



What Is the Biological Opinion?

The biological opinion is a 15-year recovery plan to implement the mandates of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as they relate to threatened and endangered fish in the Russian River and its tributaries.

The Problem The Russian River and its tributaries are home to three species of fish that are considered endangered or threatened under federal and state endangered species acts: steelhead, coho salmon, and Chinook salmon. The Russian River is also the source of drinking water for 600,000 people and is prone to severe flooding.

The biological opinion issued by the NMFS is the culmination of more than a decade of studies analyzing the impacts of Russian River water supply and flood control projects on these fish. The studies found that high summer flows in the upper Russian River and Dry Creek are too high for optimal juvenile salmon habitat. Another potential impact is the breaching of the sandbar that builds up at the mouth of the river. Studies suggest that it might be better for young salmon to keep the sandbar closed to allow for the formation of a summertime lagoon in the estuary.

The Solution To help the fish, the biological opinion proposes that summertime flows in the Russian River be reduced. Lower flows could also eliminate the need to breach the sandbar at the river mouth and may improve freshwater habitat in the estuary.

Reducing summertime flows would mean less water is available to people, however. The biological opinion addresses this problem through “reasonable and prudent alternatives” that would allow the same amount of water to flow from Lake Sonoma via Dry Creek to the Russian River but would protect the fish by restoring habitat and naturalizing 6 miles of the creek channel.

Keeping the sandbar closed at the mouth of the river could potentially result in flooding in Jenner and adjacent lands, so the biological opinion proposes “adaptive management” of the estuary that will result in the formation of a summertime lagoon while managing water levels to minimize the risk of flooding. The biological opinion also allows the sandbar to be breached if flooding is imminent.

The Implementation The Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) has created the Russian River Instream Flow and Restoration (RRIFR) Project to implement the 15-year biological opinion. In the early years, it’s likely that SCWA and NMFS will ask the State Water Resources Control Board for interim changes in summertime flows. In the meantime, with help from state and federal partners, SCWA will work on an application to make long-term changes in summertime flows. This will require an environmental impact report, which will address the potential effects of the following activities:

- Changing flows in the Russian River
- Restoring habitat in Dry Creek
- Using a Dry Creek bypass pipeline as an alternative to habitat restoration
- Changing estuary management
- Developing a regional restoration hatchery at Warm Springs Dam

In addition, the RRIFR Project will include several smaller but significant changes, including improvements to fish screens and restoration work in key Dry Creek tributaries.